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FM AMEMBASSY LUSAKA
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INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 LUSAKA 000986

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/2/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL CH ZA

SUBJECT: MICHAEL SATA: WHO IS THE KING COBRA AND WILL HE BE CROWNED?

REF: A. LUSAKA 973

¶B. 2001 LUSAKA 3246

¶C. 1994 LUSAKA 751

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Koplovsky for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶11. (SBU) Summary. Although still a strong contender in the October 30 by-election, presidential candidate Michael Sata appears to have lost some of his momentum due to internal party strife. The Patriotic Front leader excommunicated half of his party's parliamentarians in late 2007 over disagreements regarding the National Constitutional Conference (NCC), and one of them now appears bent on foiling Sata's presidential ambitions. Despite this setback, Sata is determined to win the presidency and has begun targeting rural areas in order to expand his electoral base beyond discontented urban youth. Presumably for the same reason, Sata has moderated his message by extolling foreign investors--explicitly including the Chinese whom he excoriated in the 2006 elections--for their contribution to Zambian economic development. The 71-year old opposition leader's heart attack earlier this year has also raised questions about his physical wellbeing and his suitability for office. With marginal party support, questionable physical fitness, and limited financing, Sata has many challenges to overcome within the next four weeks. End Summary.

Who Is the King Cobra?

¶12. (SBU) Michael Chilufya Sata, also known (both affectionately and derogatorily) as "King Cobra," was born in 1937 in Mpika, a city in Northern Province. A former trade unionist, he first distinguished himself within Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) as a ward chairman, member of parliament, and governor of Lusaka. Correctly detecting the winds of change, Sata joined the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in 1990. Following MMD's victory in the 1991 election, Sata became Minister for Local Government (1991), Minister of Labor (1993), and Minister of Health (1994) under Frederick Chiluba. Supporters and detractors alike refer to Sata's tenure at the Health Ministry as an example of his pragmatic and effective leadership style.

¶13. (C) Derisive and insubordinate to then-Vice President Levy Mwanawasa, Sata played a major role in Mwanawasa's departure from government in 1994. Chiluba appointed Sata to be Minister Without Portfolio in 1996 to allow him to magnify his position as MMD Executive Secretary, a position he took up in late 1995. Sata maintained a dominant role in MMD politics over the next six years, earning a reputation for his blustering, self-confident, and forceful style. What he lacks in strategic thinking, he makes up for in political cunning and force of character. Although seen as a "straight talker," the PF leader's discourse is not burdened by an unwavering commitment to accuracy or truth.

¶4. (SBU) Sata was one of the principal forces behind Chiluba's campaign to amend the constitution in order to run for a third term. With well-known presidential ambitions, Sata most likely anticipated a reward for his loyalty to the erstwhile president. In the wake of Mwanawasa's nomination by the MMD's National Executive Committee in 2001, the crestfallen Sata was rumored to be planning the formation of a new party, the Salvation Party, something he vehemently denied in the press. Just two months before the general election, Sata established the Patriotic Front (PF) party, which played an immaterial role in the 2001 general elections--Sata collected less than four percent of the vote, and his party won only one seat in parliament.

¶5. (SBU) Despite his record as one of Zambia's longest-serving Ministers, by the 2006 presidential election Sata succeeded in recasting himself as the "anti-establishment" candidate and champion of the poor, blaming the MMD party for the country's woes. His populist message resonated well with an electorate that had not benefited from Zambian economic liberalization and macroeconomic growth. Much of his popularity also resided with young voters, who saw him as a political outsider, capable of reversing the consequences of MMD's poor leadership and aware of the plight of most Zambians. Sata's criticism of foreign investors, particularly the Chinese, won him popular appeal and international recognition. In one of his only unique platforms, he called for the expulsion of Chinese migrant workers and proposed diplomatic ties with Taiwan. On election day 2006, he captured 29 percent of the vote, dominating in Lusaka, Copperbelt, and Luapula

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provinces, and won 43 parliamentary seats, making PF the strongest opposition party in parliament.

Marginal Party Support

¶6. (SBU) Sata's campaign abilities far exceed his ability to manage an opposition party. Infighting among the Patriotic Front began in late 2007 when Sata ordered party parliamentarians to boycott the National Constitutional Conference (NCC), insisting that it was biased in favor of MMD. Twenty-six members of parliament (MPs) defied the order and insisted on attending. In December, Sata threatened to expel the dissidents, but a court injunction stopped him from doing so. The tension continued into 2008, flaring up in July when PF MP Violet Sampa-Bredt attacked Sata and the rest of the party leadership as illegitimate and called for a party convention to elect new leaders. Sata responded to her and others' criticisms by describing the "rebel MPs" as "totally irrelevant to PF."

¶7. (SBU) At a meeting in mid-August with Charge--to which Sata invited several unannounced members of the press--Sata insisted that the dissenting MPs could rejoin the party if they renounced their participation in the NCC. Grandstanding before television and print reporters, Sata reiterated his stance that the NCC is an exercise in corruption, a scheme by wayward politicians to receive lavish daily compensation while the rest of the nation suffers. He denied that the NCC had any democratic value, asserting that "95 percent of the delegates are from the MMD" and that proceedings are biased in the ruling party's favor.

¶8. (C) Following President Mwanawasa's death--and despite strong impetus to unify the party--Sata cancelled his party convention in order "to focus on the election." PF MP Saviour Chishimba (himself an atypical and slightly off-center Zambian politician) lashed out publicly against Sata and his "autocratic" rule and applied for a court injunction to prohibit Sata from filing his presidential nomination. A high court judge dismissed the case on the

grounds that the Electoral Commission does not have the legal mandate to restrain Sata from filing his nomination and the PF--as an unincorporated association--does not have the legal capacity to be sued. The Solicitor General later conceded to Emboff that the case had merits but was dismissed on a technicality. He admitted that a ruling in favor of Chishimba would have resulted in social unrest. Chishimba's constituency office was later razed, allegedly by fervent PF supporters. His October 2 press conference--to address among other things the threats against him--was cut short when several PF heavies carried him from the hotel conference room and proceeded to beat him.

Questionable Physical Health

¶ 9. (U) During the campaign period, Sata will have to satisfy voters that he has the health and stamina to hold the nation's highest office. The 71-year old veteran politician suffered a heart attack in April and was rushed (at government expense) to South Africa for treatment. When asked in August whether his heart problem would affect his presidential bid, Sata replied that he was ready for nationwide campaigning. He attributed his illness to his one-time smoking habit, and with his usual over-confidence and liberal representation of the truth, he added "there is no heart attack--which is cured in 20 minutes. I am walking and fit." He challenged his opponents to go for medical testing for HIV/Aids, kaposi sarcoma (a herpes induced tumor), and cardiovascular health.

¶ 10. (SBU) Although Sata's health might not be an issue for his core constituency, it might dissuade would-be voters and prevent him from amassing popularity among an electorate weary of the possibility of another by-election before 2011. Remarkably, however, his age has not been the subject of much public discussion, ostensibly due to the almost identical age of his septuagenarian rival, MMD candidate Rupiah Banda. Consequently, there have been few calls for the presidential mantle to fall on younger shoulders--namely, United Party for National Development leader Hakainde Hichilema--even in the aftermath of President Mwanawasa's death.

Limited Financing

¶ 11. (C) Sata's lack of campaign financiers may be a decisive factor in the present campaign, particularly in light of the

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MMD government's profuse use of state resources and programs to its advantage in boosting Banda's campaign. Banda's populist discretionary spending in the aftermath of the late president's hospitalization may be on par with Sata's populist rhetoric (Ref A). In contrast, Sata's 2006 campaign appeared flush with money, presumably from Chiluba, and others indicted on corruption charges, as well as the Taiwanese. According to a senior PF parliamentarian, Sata fell out with Chiluba in 2007 over the NCC process. Subsequently, the former president has not rallied for Sata (as he did in 2006), and Sata has not repeated his 2006 pledge to disband the Task Force on Corruption that is prosecuting the former president. At a September 27 rally in Northern Province, Sata cautioned Chiluba (and former President Kenneth Kaunda) to stay out of politics and to refrain from issuing statements that align them with presidential campaigns.

¶ 12. (C) A non-PF politician told Emboff that the Taiwanese Government, which allegedly provided PF with campaign financing in 2006, had been embarrassed by Sata's erratic and outspoken behavior and was unlikely to offer additional support. Several PF representatives, including the Secretary General, have asked Emboffs for USG campaign donations on the

grounds that the party does not have adequate resources for campaigning, let alone the deployment of polling agents to monitor the elections. They admitted to some sources of outside funding, but refused to identify donors. They related, however, that the Chinese Embassy had contacted senior PF member Guy Scott, in the early stages of the 2006 vote count (when PF was leading) to request a meeting and offer financial support. The PF reps did not say whether this offer still applied in 2008. According to a judge with strong ties to the PF party, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has lent some funds to Sata's campaign.

¶13. (SBU) Sata's praise of Indian businessman Rajan Mahtani, the owner of Finance Bank who previously supported Finance Minister Ng'andu Magande's bid for the MMD nomination, suggests that PF may now be receiving funding from Mahtani and other prominent members of the business community. Whether cash-strapped or not, PF appears to be operating on a smaller budget than in 2006 and will be hard pressed to conduct an effective campaign in rural regions, given the cost and difficulties of travel within Zambia. Additionally, the party will be less able to cultivate its public appeal with the usual electoral offerings, such as food, beer, and clothing.

The Portable Populist

¶14. (SBU) Perhaps as part of his effort to overcome these obstacles and to broaden his popularity with what some have dubbed "the mini-bus constituency," Sata has moderated his message, replacing intolerant anti-investor vitriol with open affection. The October 2 cover the Zambian daily independent newspaper The Post showed Sata warmly embracing Chinese laborers. On September 30, PF placed a full-page add in The Post in which he paid tribute to Indian investors, who played an important role in Zambia's economic development and who jointly suffered from British apartheid-like discriminatory policies. The pop-eyed populist now speaks against xenophobia, despite his 2006 platform that sparked fears of backlash against foreign workers and investors.

¶15. (SBU) PF's new manifesto, which party leaders described to emboff as "the condensed version," is a different version altogether from earlier PF documents. In it, Sata explains that the PF "values local and foreign investors equally." The manifesto, entitled "The Way Forward for Zambia," promises not only to protect investment, but to provide incentives "across the board." It also explains that "a PF led government would encourage people with skills, which are in short supply in Zambia, to live and work in our country." The document also calls for a strengthened anti-corruption campaign.

¶16. (C) A mining company executive confided to emboff that his company is maintaining close ties to PF and that his staff had written Sata's recent public statements on investment. He said that although it was difficult to ascertain whether Sata's volte-face on foreign investment is sincere, it demonstrates pragmatism and political agility. A senior PF parliamentarian told emboff that Sata has always understood the importance of foreign investment and has never intended--not even in 2006--to expel or marginalize foreign business interests.

¶17. (SBU) Although Sata continues to espouse the causes of the poor, much of his current campaign has been formed around

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the notion that he is former president Mwanawasa's natural successor. Time and again, Sata refers to his reconciliation with the Mwanawasa earlier in 2008 (which followed quickly on the heels of Sata's government-sponsored medevac to South Africa in April), and their private discussions regarding Zambia's future. In August, after Mwanawasa's death, Sata

declared that "only him and me know what we talked about and none of you is going to know." One of the few documents on Sata's website, labeled "Levy's last speech," contains remarks delivered by the late president in June containing reference to his "infamous reconciliation" with Sata.

¶18. (SBU) During the period of national mourning, Sata followed Mwanawasa's body from province to province ostensibly to show his deep remorse, but in reality to inhibit MMD's attempt to capture of a windfall "sympathy vote." This gesture seemed out of place for many who remember the cunning politician's frequent ridicule of Mwanawasa for his speech impediment caused by a car accident in the early 1990s (in a 2006 presidential rally Sata ripped apart a cabbage, which had become Sata's prop for characterizing Mwanawasa's mental state). In the space of several short months, Sata has endeavored to recast himself to the Zambian electorate as the confidant of the late President and the candidate most capable of continuing the former President's legacy.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) In a particularly telling move, Sata abandoned his former website (www.pf.com.zm) and created a new domain name (www.michaelsata.co.zm), which most appropriately conveys the true nature of his personality-driven party. Despite Sata's demagoguery, he is surrounded by many thoughtful politicians who seem to believe in his cause and his political prospects and are willing to overlook his eccentricities, shortcomings, and frequent populist poppycock. In the event of a PF victory, Sata will be authorized to appoint eight additional MPs, several of whom are likely to assume cabinet positions. These appointees, together with some other PF MPs, are apt to continue to extend reasonable counsel and exert a moderating influence. Although Banda's victory is not a forgone conclusion, Sata and his cadre of supporters will have to work hard to gain back some of PF's momentum and to be seen as a credible party by a wider body of voters.

KOPLOVSKY